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COORDINATION AND INTEGRATION OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL PROGRAMMES

Coordination of statistical data collection

Report of the Secretary-General

1. At its twenty-eighth session (New York, 27 February-3 March 1995), the Statistical Commission requested the United Nations Statistics Division to submit an updated version of the Inventory on Statistical Data-collection Activities to the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination, after review by the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC) Subcommittee on Statistical Activities.[1]

2. At its eighteenth session (New York, 16-18 April 1996), the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination noted with satisfaction the work done by the United Nations Statistics Division in updating the Inventory of Statistical Data-collection Activities which had been collected from international organizations/agencies (E/CN.3/1997/19, para. 41). The Inventory is available both in printed form and as a machine-readable database.

3. During the discussion at the eighteenth session of the Working Group, the issue of the usefulness and effectiveness of the Inventory of Statistical Data-collection Activities in the work of international organizations was raised. Following the discussion, the United Nations Statistics Division sent letters to members of the Working Group requesting an answer to the following questions: (a) Has your organization used the Inventory in its work for the past two years? For example has it used the Inventory in the process of introducing a new questionnaire? (b) Do you think the Inventory is an effective coordination tool in the coordination of data-collection activities among international

* E/CN.3/1997/1.

statistical organizations/agencies? (c) In what way can use of the Inventory be improved in order to eliminate overlapping and duplication of data collection?

4. Based on the replies received, the following general conclusion may be drawn, namely, that only three international organizations/agencies had used the Inventory for the past two years in their decision-making process concerning new data collection. Some of the international organizations/agencies concluded that the Inventory was not a very effective tool for coordination, based on the following arguments:

(a) Specialists in the subject-matter area are likely to use other tools, most especially their own knowledge, to find available statistics for their use;

(b) Its main use is as a guide to who does what, that is to say, as an information tool or reference guide. It would not be appropriate to use it when setting up a questionnaire, as it cannot be completely up-to-date (the current version contains information that is two years old) and it is not always specific about what is being collected (it contains, at best, a list of variables and, at worst, general statements);

(c) A coordination tool is of use only if it is guaranteed to be comprehensive. In general, such inventories refer only to regular data collection, not taking into account ad hoc activities as well;

(d) There is a size aspect: if it is to be used as a coordination tool, it must be available to those at the working level who might be interested even in only a small extract from it. Therefore, the ability to pick out parts would be useful. Distributing it on diskette, rather than on paper, was a step forward, but if it was stored in database format, such extraction might be easier;

(e) The best way of combating duplication of data collection is to encourage countries to immediately signal the areas where they notice its occurrence. Then, efforts would be concentrated in dealing with those areas where the problem is known to exist, rather than in wasting a large amount of time looking for needles in haystacks which may or may not exist;

(f) Improvements in metadata, standardization of classifications and similar factors are more likely than the Inventory to be useful in reducing duplication.

POINTS FOR DISCUSSION

5. The Commission may wish to decide on the matter of the continuation of the Inventory of Statistical Data-collection Activities.

Notes

[1] See Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1995, Supplement No. 8 (E/1995/28), para. 91.